The Adventure of the Clothes-line

By CAROLYN WELLS

Illustrated by Frederic Dorr Steel

THE members of the Society of Infallible Detectives were just sitting around and being socially infallible, in their rooms in Fakir Street, when President Holmes strode in. He was much saturniner than usual, and the others at once deduced there was something toward.

"And it 's this," said Holmes, perceiving that they had perceived it. "A reward is offered for the solution of a great mystery—so great, my colleagues, that I fear none of you will be able to solve it, or even to help me in the marvelous work I shall do when ferreting it out."

"Humph!" grunted the Thinking-Machine, riveting his steel-blue eyes upon the speaker.

"He voices all our sentiments," said Raffles, with his winning smile. "Fire away, Holmes. What 's the prob?"

"To explain a most mysterious proceeding down on the East Side."

Though a tall man, Holmes spoke shortly, for he was peeved at the inattentive attitude of his collection of colleagues. But of course he still had his Watson, so he put up with the indifference of the rest of the cold world.

"Are n't all proceedings down on the East Side mysterious?" asked Arsène Lupin, with an aristocratic look.

Holmes passed his brow wearily under his hand.

"Inspector Spyer," he said, "was riding on the Elevated Road—one of the small numbered Avenues—when, as he passed a tenement-house district, he saw a clothes-line strung from one high window to another across a courtyard."

"Was it Monday?" asked the Thinking-Machine, who for the moment was thinking he was a washing-machine.

"That does n't matter. About the middle of the line was suspended—"

"By clothes-pins?" asked two or three of the Infallibles at once.

"Was suspended a beautiful woman."

"Hanged?"

"No. *Do listen!* She hung by her hands, and was evidently trying to cross from one house to the other. By her exhausted and agonized face, the inspector feared she could not hold on much longer. He sprang from his seat to rush to her assistance, but the train had already started, and he was too late to get off."

"What was she doing there?" "Did she fall?" "What did she look like?" and various similar nonsensical queries fell from the lips of the great detectives.

"Be silent, and I will tell you all the known facts. She was a society woman, it is clear, for she was robed in a chiffon evening gown, one of those roll-top things. She wore rich jewelry and dainty slippers with jeweled buckles. Her hair, unloosed from its moorings, hung in heavy masses far down her back."

"How extraordinary! What does it all mean?" asked M. Dupin, ever straightforward of speech.

"I don't know yet," answered Holmes, honestly; "I 've studied the matter only a few months. But I will find out, if I have to raze the whole tenement block. There *must* be a clue somewhere."

"Marvelous! Holmes, marvelous!" said a phonograph in the corner, which Watson had fixed up, as he had to go out.

"The police have asked us to take up the case and have offered a reward for its solution. Find out who was the lady, what she was doing, and why she did it."

"Are there any clues?" asked M. Vidocq, while M. Lecocq said simultaneously, "Any footprints?"

"There is one footprint; no other clue."

"Where is the footprint?"

"On the ground, right under where the lady was hanging."

"But you said the rope was high from the ground."

"More than a hundred feet."

"And she stepped down and made a single footprint. Strange! Quite strange!" and the Thinking-Machine shook his yellow old head.

"She did nothing of the sort," said Holmes, petulantly. "If you fellows would listen, you might hear something. The occupants of the tenement houses have been questioned. But, as it turns out, none of them chanced to be at home at the time of the occurrence. There was a suffrage parade in the next street, and they had all been urged to go, and did."

"Had a light snow fallen the night before?" asked Lecocq, eagerly.

"Yes, of course," answered Holmes. "How could we know anything, else? Well, the lady had dropped her slipper, and although the slipper was not found, it having been annexed by the tenement people who came home first, I had a chance to study the footprint. The slipper was a two and a half D. It was too small for her."

"How do you know?"

"Women always wear slippers too small for them."

"Then how did she come to drop it off?" This from Raffles, triumphantly.

Holmes looked at him pityingly.

"She kicked it off because it was too tight. Women always kick off their slippers when playing bridge or in an opera-box or at a dinner."

"And always when they 're crossing a clothes-line?" This in Lupin's most sarcastic vein.

"Naturally," said Holmes, with a taciturnine frown. "The footprint clearly denotes a lady of wealth and fashion, somewhat short of stature, and weighing about one hundred and sixty. She was of an animated nature—"

"Suspended animation," put in Luther Trant, wittily, and Scientific Sprague added, "Like the Coffin of Damocles, or whoever it was."

But Holmes frowned on their lightheadedness.

"We must find out what it all means," he said in his gloomiest way. "I have a tracing of the footprint."

"I wonder if my seismospygmograph would work on it," mused Trant.

"I am the Prince of Footprints," declared Lecocq, pompously. "*I* will solve the mystery."

"Do your best, all of you," said their illustrious president. "I fear you can do little; these things are unintelligible to the unintelligent. But study on it, and meet here again one week from to-night, with your answers neatly type-written on one side of the paper."

THE Infallible Detectives started off, each affecting a jaunty sanguineness of demeanor, which did not in the least impress their president, who was used to sanguinary impressions.

They spent their allotted seven days in the study of the problem; and a lot of the seven nights, too, for they wanted to delve into the baffling secret by sun or candle-light, as dear Mrs. Browning so poetically puts it.

And when the week had fled, the Infallibles again gathered in the Fakir Street sanctum, each face wearing the smug smirk and smile of one who had quested a successful quest and was about to accept his just reward.

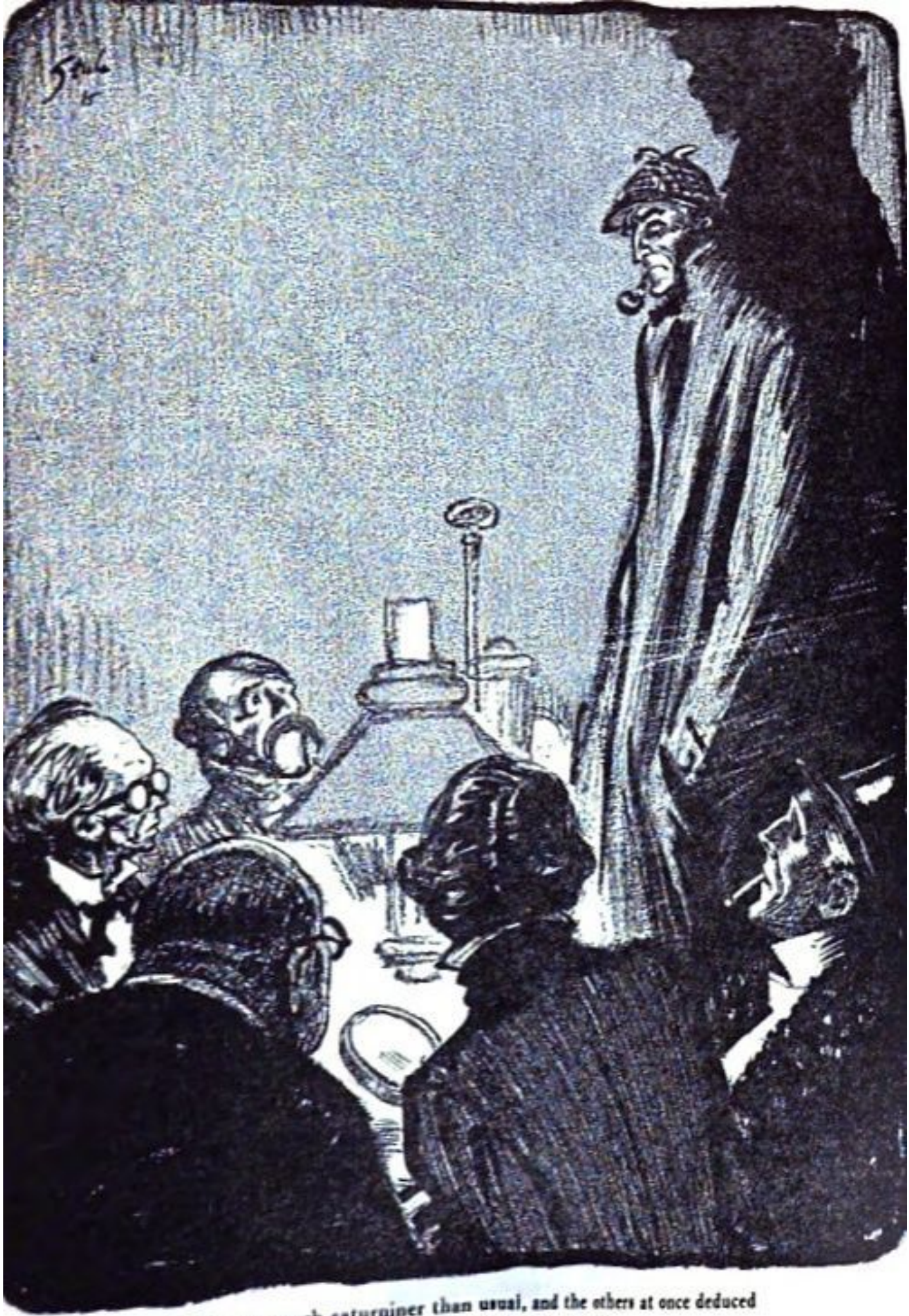
"And now," said President Holmes, "as nothing can be hid from the Infallible Detectives, I assume we have all discovered *why* the lady hung from the clothes-line above that deep and dangerous chasm of a tenement courtyard."

"We have," replied his colleagues, in varying tones of pride, conceit, and mock modesty.

"I cannot think," went on the hawk-like voice, "that you have, any of you, stumbled upon the real solution of the mystery; but I will listen to your amateur attempts."

"As the oldest member of our organization, I will tell my solution first," said Vidocq, calmly. "I have not been able to find the lady, but I am convinced that she was merely an expert trapezist or tight-rope walker, practising a new trick to amaze her Coney Island audiences."

"Nonsense!" cried Holmes. "In that



"He was much saturniner than usual, and the others at once deduced there was something toward"

case the lady would have worn tights or fleshings. We are told she was in full evening dress of the smartest set."

Arsène Lupin spoke next.

"It 's too easy," he said boredly; "she was a typist or stenographer who had been annoyed by attentions from her employer, and was trying to escape from the brute."

"Again I call your attention to her costume," said Holmes, with a look of intolerance on his finely cold-chiseled face.

"That 's all right," returned Lupin, easily. "Those girls dress every old way! I 've seen 'em. They don't think anything of evening clothes at their work."

"Humph!" said the Thinking-Machine, and the others all agreed with him.

"Next," said Holmes, sternly.

"I 'm next," said Lecocq. "I submit that the lady escaped from a near-by lunatic asylum. She had the illusion that she was an old overcoat and the moths had got at her. So of course she hung herself on the clothes-line. This theory of lunacy also accounts for the fact that the lady's hair was down —like *Ophelia's,* you know."

"It would have been easier for her to swallow a few good moth-balls," said Holmes, looking at Lecocq in stormy silence. "Mr. Gryce, you are an experienced deducer; what did *you* conclude?"

Mr. Gryce glued his eyes to his right boot toe, after his celebrated habit. "I make out she was a-slumming. You know, all the best ladies are keen about it now. And I feel sure that she belonged to the Cult for the Betterment of Clothes-lines. She was by way of being a tester. She had to go across them hand over hand, and if they bore her weight, they were passed by the censor."

"And if they did n't?"

"Apparently that predicament had not occurred at the time of our problem, and so cannot be considered."

"I think Gryce is right about the slumming," remarked Luther Trant, "but the reason for the lady hanging from the clothes-line is the im-

"The lady had dropped her slipper"

perative necessity she felt for a thorough airing, after her tenemental visitations; there is a certain tenement scent, if I may so express it, that requires ozone in quantities."

"You 're too material," said the Thinking-Machine, with a far-away look in his weak, blue eyes. "The lady was a disciple of New Thought. She had to go into the silence, or concentrate, or whatever they call it. And they always choose strange places for these thinking spells. They have to have solitude, and, as I understand it, the clothes-line was not crowded?"

Rouletabille laughed right out.

"You 're 'way off, Thinky," he said. "What ailed that dame was just that she wanted to reduce. I 've read about it in the women's journals. They all want to reduce. They take all sorts of crazy exercises, and this crossing clothes-lines hand over hand is the latest. I 'll bet it took off twenty of those avoirdupois with which old Sherly credited her."

"Pish and a few tushes!" remarked Raffles, in his smart society jargon. "You don't fool me. That clever little bear was making up a new dance to thrill society next winter. You 'll see. Sunday-paper head-lines: 'Stunning New Dance! The Clothes-line Cling! Caught on like Wildfire!' *That 's* what it 's all about. What do you know, eh?"

"Go take a walk, Raffles," said Holmes, not unkindly; "you 're sleepy yet. Scientific Sprague, you sometimes put over an abstruse theory, what do you say?"

"I did n't need science," said Sprague, carelessly. "As soon as I heard she had her hair down, I jumped to the correct conclusion. She had been washing her hair, and was drying it. My sister always sticks her head out of the skylight; but this lady's plan is, I should judge, a more all-round success."

As they had now all voiced their theories, President Holmes rose to give them the inestimable benefit of his own views.

"Your ideas are not without some merit," he conceded, "but you have overlooked the eternal-feminine element in the problem. As soon as I tell you the real solution, you will each wonder why it escaped your notice. The lady thought she heard a mouse, so she scrambled out of the window, preferring to risk her life on the perilous clothes-line rather than stay in the dwelling where the mouse was also. It is all very simple. She was doing her hair, threw her head over forward to twist it, as they always do, and so espied the mouse sitting in the corner."

"'' Marvelous! Holmes, marvelous!' said Watson"

"Marvelous! Holmes, marvelous!" exclaimed Watson, who had just come back from his errand.

Even as they were all pondering on Holmes's superior wisdom, the telephone-bell rang.

"Are you there?" said President Holmes, for he was ever English of speech.

"Yes, yes," returned the impatient voice of the chief of police. "Call off your detective workers. We have discovered who the lady was who crossed the clothes-line, and why she did it."

"I can't imagine you really know," said Holmes into the transmitter; "but tell me what you think."

"A-r-r-rh! Of course I know! It was just one of those confounded moving-picture stunts!"

"Indeed! And why did the lady kick off her slipper?"

"A-r-r-r-h! It was part of the fool plot. She 's Miss Flossy Flicker of the Flim-Flam Film Company, doin' the six-reel thriller, 'At the End of Her Rope.'"

"Ah," said Holmes, suavely, "my compliments to Miss Flicker on her good work."

"Marvelous! Holmes, marvelous!" said Watson.

IN LIGHTER VEIN

Eggs are Up

"Ye mind the egg I borrowed from ye, Mrs. Clancy? Well here 's the yolk on account. I 'll have to owe ye the white"